

February 7th, 2020

Cal Murgu  
New College of Florida  
Sarasota, FL 34243

To the Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communications Editors:

I am writing to apply for the position of Reviews Co-Editor for the *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communications*. My sincere thanks for considering my application.

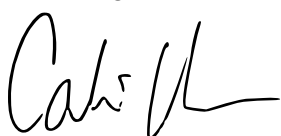
I am currently a Research, Instruction, and Digital Humanities Librarian at the New College of Florida, a four-year public liberal arts honors college in Sarasota, Florida. In addition to digital humanities support, instruction, and research, I coordinate our scholarly communication initiatives, which include managing the institution repository, outreach, and programming, revolving around open access and open science. Prior to my current role, I oscillated between positions in scholarly communications, digital scholarship, and more traditional instruction roles. Having had some time to reflect on this journey, I've learned that my experiences have led me to hold a much more expansive definition of what constitutes scholarship in our current scholarly landscape. As a result, my focus has been on alternative forms of scholarship—including but not limited to electronic textual scholarship, digital editions, and digital humanities projects—and ways that librarians can work to normalize, disseminate, and preserve these novel forms of scholarly production. Given the above, as a Reviews Co-Editor, one of my focus areas would include amplifying conversations surrounding the diverse forms of scholarly outputs, including software, tools, and born digital projects, that are often overlooked or considered peripheral.

While I am relatively new to the profession, I've gained experience in academic publishing as an author, reviewer, and editor for several open access journals. Most recently, I coordinated the successful 'flip' of *Selbyana*, the journal of the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, from a print, subscription to an open access model. Ultimately, my experiences in publishing have given me an acute understanding of the operational work involved (technical as well as editorial). As the work involved ebbs and flows throughout the publishing cycle, I've learned to triage and prioritize accordingly to ensure the quality and timeliness of publications.

Finally, my direct supervisor is supportive of this application and considers editorial work well within the scope of my assignment of work. I have attached a signed letter of support to this application. I look forward to hearing from you. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Cal Murgu

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cal Murgu', with a stylized flourish at the end.

February 7th, 2020

Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication Editors

Dear Editors,

I write in support of Calin Murgu's application for the position of Reviews Co-Editor for the *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication* (2020-2024). Mr. Murgu serves as Research, Instruction and Digital Humanities librarian in the Jane Bancroft Cook Library at New College of Florida. He is also the Managing Editor of *Selbyana*, the open access journal of the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens. I affirm that editorial activities fall within the scope of Mr. Murgu's professional responsibilities. Mr. Murgu will be afforded the time required to complete his work for the Journal.

Mr. Murgu has my complete backing for this application. I have great confidence that he will produce high quality work and will prove to be a valuable addition to the Journal's editorial team.

Regards,



Brian Doherty,  
Dean of the Library  
New College of Florida

# Cal Murgu

5800 Bay Shore Road • New College of Florida • Sarasota, FL 34243  
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## Education

**MLIS**, Western University (2018)

- Awarded Beckman Gold Medal in LIS

**MA, History**, McGill University (2015)

- MRP: “Innocence is as Innocence Does!”: Edward S.W. De Cobain, Hegemonic Masculinity, and the Politics of Scandal in Victorian Britain, 1884-1893 (N.B: Later published as article in *Gender & History*.)

**BA, Honours History, Literature Minor**, University of Windsor (2014)

## Library Experience

**Research, Instruction, and Digital Humanities Librarian**, New College of Florida (2018)

- Working collaboratively with faculty, students, staff and other librarians on established digital projects, as well as providing support for new digital scholarship projects (data viz, network graphs, GIS, text analysis, CMS)
- Coordinating scholarly communications, including OA and institutional repository Open@NCF
- Coordinating OJS instance for open access journal, *Selbyana*, and serving as technical editor managing file and metadata import/export, open access publishing standards, and licensing
- Coordinating Digital Scholarship Studio and supervising Library Digital Scholarship Fellow
- Cultivating a culture which embraces digital scholarship and methodologies for use in teaching and research
- Providing outreach to non-academic units to develop events and services that promote the Library
- Providing support and expertise in the use of digital technologies for research and learning, including but not limited to digital curation software, text analysis, data mining, mapping, social network analysis and data visualization
- Participating in collection development in assigned areas, liaising with assigned subjects, and lead/participating in library-sponsored events and exhibits
- Teaching full/half credit courses and specialized workshops

**Co-op Librarian**, University of Waterloo (2017)

- Collaborated with the Office of Academic Integrity, the Writing and Communication Centre, and BASE program to develop instruction sessions and specialized workshops on citation management software, academic integrity, and information literacy training
- Assisted subject librarians with course-specific information literacy instruction for a variety of disciplines; developed and ran information literacy sessions that applied ACRL Information Literacy Framework principles
- Managed the Assignment and Research desk; Provided reference assistance for students, faculty, and other library patrons
- Coordinated the Research Metrics Framework, a yearly bibliometric study of research impact

**Institutional Repository Coordinator**, Western University (2016 - 2018)

- Administered the underlying CMS of the university's institutional repository
- Appropriately organized and indexed electronic resources using controlled vocabularies
- Produced concise monthly reports and infographics detailing various metrics, such as online engagement metrics
- Provided support for graduate students and faculty members, including user support, technical training, and intellectual property information

**Digital Projects Coordinator**, Uni. of Windsor (2015 - 2016)

- Coordinated digital scholarship initiatives, including digital collections, information visualizations, text analysis, and relational databases
- Supported projects through front-end development, CMS setup and administration, provincial and federal grant writing, and business cases and project proposals
- Assisted with the development and instruction of a unique third-year module that brought together information literacy training, archival materials, and digital tools and methods for public history

## **Other Employment Experience**

**Records Information Clerk**, Town of LaSalle (2018)

- Administered the Records and Information Management Program of the Town, including Laserfiche ECMS, providing assistance in implementation and maintenance
- Developed and maintained procedures to support the Records and Information Management Program
- Provided consultation and recommendations for software or filing equipment which affected the storage, retrieval and maintenance of records and information

**Graduate Research Assistant**, Western University (2017 - 2018)

- Assisted faculty member with literature review for project on human-computer interaction and mobile application accessibility; contributed to article length manuscript

**Editorial Assistant, Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies**, McGill University (2016 - Pres)

- Managing the desktop publishing stage for the Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies, an open access journal published by McGill University Libraries
- Creating iterative proofs of articles using Adobe InDesign
- Communicating with managing editors and authors to facilitate timely completion of journal issues

**Graduate Teaching Assistant**, McGill University (2014 - 2015)

- Assisted faculty members with second and third year undergraduate modules by facilitating tutorials and conferences, guest-lecturing, performing administrative duties, managing course LMS, and marking essays and exams (150 students)

**Undergraduate Teaching Assistant**, University of Windsor (2012 - 2014)

- Over the course of four semesters, assisted faculty members in the Department of Labour Studies with first and second year undergraduate modules by facilitating tutorials, performing administrative duties, managing course LMS, and marking

## Scholarship

**Asterisk represents undergraduate student**

### Journal Articles

[5] A. Kutlay\* and C. Murgu, “Shiny *Fabric*: A Lightweight, Open-source App for Visualizing and Reporting Library Relationships,” *Code4Lib*, Iss. 47, Feb. 2020.

[4] A. Fairweather, C. Murgu, and T. Race, “Diving into Digital on a Small-scale: Digital curricula and technology-based education at the New College of Florida,” *Distance Learning Journal*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2020).

[3] C. Murgu and K. Ivings, “‘Blind Trust is Not Enough’: Considering Practical Verifiability and Open Citations in Wikipedia,” in “Information/Control: Control in the Age of Post-Truth,” eds. Stacy Wood and James Lowry. Special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2019).

[2] C. Murgu, “‘Innocence is as Innocence Does’: Anglo-Irish Politics, Masculinity and the De Cobain Gross Indecency Scandal of 1891–3,” *Gender & History*, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 309–328, (2017). Preprint

- [1] H.L.M. Jacobs and C. Murgu, “Questioning the Past and Possible Futures: Digital Historiography and Critical Librarianship,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 1–22, (2017).

### **Under Review or In Progress**

- [2] C. Murgu, “What’s .warc got to do with it?: Librarianship, Digital Literacy, and Supporting New Modes of Historical Scholarship ,” in preparation.
- [1] C. Murgu, “Web Archives, Critical Digital Literacy, and the Growing Primacy of Born Digital Objects,” forthcoming in *Critical Library Pedagogy*, 2020.

### **Non-Refereed**

- [1] C. Murgu, “DH and the Digital Archive,” in *MediaCommons Field Guide*, May 2017.

### **Selected Conference Papers and Posters**

- [10] C. Murgu, “Introducing *Fabric*: Using R (Shiny) to Create Open Source Tools for Visualizing Library Networks,” DSS ALA Midwinter (Virtual).
- [9] C. Murgu, “Local Metadata = Meaningful Metadata: A Case Study of Using Local Metadata for DH Development and Developing ‘Buyin’,” Paper, DHSI 2019 Conference and Colloquium, University of Victoria, BC, June 2019.
- [8] C. Murgu, A. Kutlay\*, “Putting Local Metadata to Strategic Use: Visualizing 50 Years of Theses Metadata,” Poster, Florida Digital Humanities Conference, UNF, Jacksonville, FL, Mar 2019.
- [7] T. Race, A. Fairweather, C. Murgu, “Diving into Digital on a Small-Scale: Digital Curricula and Technology-based Education at a LAC,” Going Deeply Digital: Promises & Challenges of the Digital Curriculum in Higher Education, NSU, Ft. Lauderdale, FL, Feb 2019.
- [6] C. Murgu, “(Librarians and) The Modern Research and Publishing Cycle,” FIMULAW18, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada, Apr 2018.
- [5] C. Murgu, “Leveraging Open Access for your Career,” Open Access Colloquium, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, Oct 2017.
- [4] C. Murgu, “Understanding Faculty Ambivalence to Alternative Scholarly Publishing,” Canadian Association for Professional Academic Librarians, Congress for the Social Sciences and Humanities, Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada May 2017.
- [3] C. Murgu, “Local Actions / Global Implications: Economic and Social Impacts of OA Publishing,” SOGS Research Forum, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada Mar 2017.

[2] G. Lazure and C. Murgu, “The Spanish Republic of Letters Project,” Cultures of Knowledge Visualization Meeting, Politecnico di Milano, Como, Italy, Apr 2016.

[1] C. Murgu, “‘A Goodly Crop of Scandals to Discuss’: E. S.W. De Cobain and the Mechanisms of Sex Scandal in Late-Victorian Britain and Ireland,” McGill-Queen’s Graduate History Conference, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Feb 2016.

## Reviews

[3] General reviewer for *ADHO2020*.

[2] General reviewer for *International Journal of Library and Information Studies*, 2019 - ongoing.

[1] General reviewer for *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, 2019 - ongoing.

## Workshops and Continuing Education

[4] Archived Unleashed Toolkit Datathon, AUT Datathon, Columbia University, NYC, USA, March 2020.

[3] Continuing Education to Advance Web Archiving CEDWARC, George Washington University, Washington, DC, October 2019.

[2] “Textual Processing,” Digital Humanities Summer Institute, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada, June 2019.

[1] Institute for Research Design in Librarianship — 2019 Cohort, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA, USA, June 2019.

## Awards and Grants

DHSI Tuition Scholarship, University of Victoria (2020)

Archives Unleashed Datathon Travel Grant, Columbia University, NYC (March, 2020)

CEDWARC Travel Grant, Virginia Tech (2019)

Provost’s Faculty Development Fund, New College (2019)

Provost’s International Funding Award, New College (2019)

DHSI Tuition Scholarship, University of Victoria (2019)

Margaret Beckman Gold Medal in LIS, Western University (2018)

- Awarded to the graduating MLIS student with the highest academic standing

H.W. Wilson Graduate Scholarship, Western University (2017)

- Highest academic average in the previous term

Beacock OSOTF Travel Grant, Western University (2017)

- Travel grant to attend a conference or professional development opportunity

Ontario Trillium Foundation Development Grant, University of Windsor (2016)

- Development grant in the amount of 72,000 CAD to collaborate with the Chatham Sports Hall of Fame on a digital project

Brian Robert Beacock Scholarship, Western University (2016)

- Awarded to MLIS student based on academic achievement

McCall MacBain Fellowship, McGill University (2015)

- Competitive merit-based departmental fellowship

SSHRC Master's Scholarship, Research Council of Canada (2014)

- Competitive merit-based federal scholarship

OGS Graduate Scholarship, Ministry of Education (2014) (Declined)

- Competitive merit-based provincial scholarship

University of Windsor Graduate Scholarship (2014) (Declined)

- Competitive merit-based graduate entry scholarship

## Professional Affiliations

Membership in the American Library Association (ACRL)

Membership in the Canadian Association for Professional Academic Librarians

## Teaching

Tutorial (Full term, full credit) — *Digital Storytelling and Visual Journalism*, Spring 2020

Independent Study Project — *LGBTQ+ Reference Database*, Spring 2020 (Lee Collins)

Independent Study Project — *Podcasting and Digital Storytelling*, Spring 2020 (David Perkins, Sergio Salinas)

Independent Study Project — *Digital Humanities and Music Composition*, Spring 2020 (Emma Solloway)

Tutorial (Full term, full credit) — *Texts + Technologies: An Introduction to Digital Methods in the Humanities*, Fall 2019



Tutorial (Full term, half credit) — *Aeolus* Digital Publishing Tutorial, Spring 2019

## **Media**

“Seeking truth and passing it on, a Selby and New College collaboration,” *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, November 14, 2019, [LINK](#)

“New College, Selby Gardens team up to publish online research journals,” *New College of Florida News*, September 16, 2019, [LINK](#)

“Technology pushes Jane Bancroft Cook Library forward,” *New College of Florida News*, June 3, 2019, [LINK](#)

“New app gives users a new way to explore theses at New College,” *New College of Florida News*, April 8, 2019, [LINK](#)

“Students engage in editing as activism,” *New College of Florida News*, March 11, 2019, [LINK](#)

## **Service**

### **Regional or State Wide Committees**

Digital Initiatives Standing Committee, Vice-Chair, FLVC (2019 — ongoing)

Executive Member, Florida Digital Humanities Consortium (2019 — ongoing)

### **Campus Wide Committees**

Hiring Committee, Data Services Librarian, New College (2020)

Hiring Committee, Director of ORPS, New College (2019)

President’s Policy Committee, New College (2019)

### **Library Committees**

Chair, Library Faculty Committee, New College (2019 - ongoing)

Secretary and Vice-Chair, Library Faculty Committee, New College (2018 - 2019)

Events and Promotions Committee, New College (2018 — ongoing)

Library Data Community of Practice, University of Waterloo (2017)

Multi-year Strategic Planning Committee, University of Waterloo (2017)

Open Access Week Planning Committee, University of Waterloo (2017)

Open Access Working Group, University of Waterloo (2017)

## **Student Committees**

MLIS Student Council, Housing and Student Needs Rep, Western University (2018)

MLIS Student Council, Academic Coordinator, Western University (2017)

CAPAL Western Chapter, Co-Chair, Western University (2017)

Graduate Representative, SOGS Student Council, McGill University (2015)

Graduate Representative, Curriculum Committee, McGill University (2015)

Graduate Representative, Graduate Studies Committee, McGill University (2015)

## **Skills**

### **Technical Skills**

#### **Software**

- Adobe Creative Suite, Microsoft Office Suite, OpenRefine
- Mendeley, RefWorks, Zotero

**Markup, Programming, Frameworks and Query Languages** Comfortable writing, running, and troubleshooting scripts that deal with text manipulation or visualization.

- HTML, CSS, XML
- Basic Python
- Basic R (TM, Shiny)
- Basic SQL
- Basic JS, PHP
- Basic Bash
- Hugo, Jekyll

#### **Content Management Systems**

- D2L, LibApps, Sobek
- Drupal, DSpace, Digital Commons, GRAV
- Minimal Computing: Wax, Ed, CollectionBuilder
- WordPress, OJS, Omeka, Arches, Mukurtu

#### **Language Skills**

- English (Fluent)
- Romanian (Fluent)
- French (Basic)

*Perspective*

# “Blind Trust is Not Enough”: Considering Practical Verifiability and Open Referencing in Wikipedia

Cal Murgu and Krisandra Ivings

## ABSTRACT

This article draws attention to the often-unseen information inequalities that occur in the way that Wikipedia content is referenced. Drawing on digital information control and virtual gatekeeping scholarship, we contend that by not considering the degree to which references are practically accessible and verifiable, Wikipedia editors are implicitly promoting a control mechanism that is limiting the potential of Wikipedia to serve, as Willinsky puts it, “as a gateway to a larger world of knowledge.” We question the widespread practice of referencing peer-reviewed literature that is obscured by prohibitive paywalls. As we see it, two groups are disadvantaged by this practice. First, Wikipedia editors who lack access to the most current scholarly literature are unable to verify a reference or confirm the veracity of a fact or figure. Second, and perhaps most important, general readers are left with two unsatisfactory options in this scenario: they can either trust the authority of the citation or pay to access the article. Building on Don Fallis’ work on epistemic consequences of Wikipedia, this paper contends that promoting practically verifiable references would work to mitigate these inequalities and considers how relatively new initiatives could be used to improve the quality and utility of Wikipedia more generally.

Murgu, Cal and Krisandra Ivings. “Blind Trust is Not Enough’: Considering Practical Verifiability and Open Referencing in Wikipedia,” in “Information/Control: Control in the Age of Post-Truth,” eds. James Lowry, Stacy Wood, and Andrew J Lau. Special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 2, no.2 (2019).

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## INTRODUCTION

“The news is broken, but we figured out how to fix it,” declared the founder of Wikipedia, Jimmy Wales, in an April 2017 video announcing the launch of a new crowd-sourced journalism platform, Wikitribune. “On the internet, nobody is guarding the gate,” he continued, “it’s time to rethink the gatekeeper.”<sup>1</sup> Wales’ response to the diminishing quality of online, ad-financed journalism in an age of “alt-facts” and “misinformation” is to bring together high-quality journalism, volunteer fact-checkers, and grammarians on a wiki platform and make the product freely available to all. This initiative adopts the most celebrated qualities of Wikipedia, in particular, principles of transparency, openness, and the awesome potential of crowdsourced content creation. Indeed, Wales’ description of Wikitribune is not that far removed from how he described Wikipedia in 2004: “Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge, that’s what we’re doing.”<sup>2</sup>

Since 2001, Wales’ flagship product, Wikipedia, has become the largest encyclopedia known to humankind. The English-language Wikipedia includes over 5.4 million unique articles, with over 31 million registered users, 129,237 of which are active contributors.<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia has become a trusted source for learning about unfamiliar concepts, historical figures, and other general knowledge. It can also be a convenient starting point for personal research. As John Willinsky aptly stated in 2007, “Wikipedia stands alongside open source software (such as Linux and Apache) as a new breed of impossible public goods that have been made possible by the Internet.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, what makes Wikipedia possible is the unexpected rigor of its contributors; we can infer from the surprising quality of many Wikipedia articles that they are keen and committed to the Wikipedia project.<sup>5</sup> The wiki platform has also been lauded for facilitating democratic

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Cuthbertson, “Wikipedia Founder Jimmy Wales Believes He Can Fix Fake News with Wikitribune Project,” *Newsweek*, April 25, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/wikipedia-jimmy-wales-fake-news-wikitribune-crowdfunding-589226>.

<sup>2</sup> “Wikipedia Founder Jimmy Wales Responds,” *Slashdot*, July 28, 2004, <https://slashdot.org/story/04/07/28/1351230/wikipedia-founder-jimmy-wales-responds>

<sup>3</sup> “Wikipedia:Statistics,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 10, 2017, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Statistics>

<sup>4</sup> John Willinsky, “What Open Access Research Can Do For Wikipedia,” *First Monday* 12 (2007). <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/1624/1539>.

<sup>5</sup> Several studies over the last decade have compared Wikipedia to other encyclopedias, like the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. See, for example, Jim Giles, “Internet Encyclopedias go Head to Head,” *Nature* 438 (2005): 900-901; Imogen Casebourne, Chris Davies, Michelle Fernandes, and Naomi Norman, “Assessing the Accuracy and Quality of Wikipedia Entries Compared to Popular Online Encyclopaedias: A Comparative Preliminary Study Across Disciplines in English, Spanish and Arabic,” [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/29/EPIC\\_Oxford\\_report.pdf](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/29/EPIC_Oxford_report.pdf) (accessed

participation in a digital information age. As Matthew Barton writes of wikis, “[they] are not weapons of hegemonic domination but tools for democratic liberation. Their power comes not from above but from below; not from publishers but plebeians; not from a single proud tyrant but from a thousand humble citizens.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, if the success of Wikipedia is any measure it seems that Wales’ rallying call has already happened: there are very few gatekeepers on Wikipedia.

Or are there? In this paper we draw attention to the often-unseen information control that occurs in the way that Wikipedia content is created and referenced. We focus on Wikipedia’s policy of verifiability and contend that in its current form and practice it does not do enough to encourage open citation practices. Specifically, we question the referenced literature blocked by prohibitive paywalls without considering and including links to open resources, a practice that, as we suggest, is encouraged by Wikipedia content creation policies. In a context of increased growth of open access content, we argue that this practice runs counter to the principles of transparency and openness which together underpin Wikipedia.<sup>7</sup> As a result, Wikipedia is impeded from becoming, as Willinsky puts it, “a gateway to a larger world of knowledge.”<sup>8</sup> We find that two groups are disadvantaged by this practice. First, Wikipedia editors who lack access to the most current scholarly literature are unable to verify a reference or confirm the veracity of content. While publishers like Taylor & Francis and Elsevier have distributed free accounts to prolific editors to increase the quality of content in Wikipedia, these special dispensations have in effect created another level of inequality among editors; those who meet the criteria, and those who do not. Second, and perhaps most important, general readers are left with two unsatisfactory options in this scenario: they can either trust the authority of the citation or pay to access the article.

In putting this perspective forward, we do not mean to suggest that everything must be made open, nor are we promoting a Wikipedia editorial process that privileges

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February 17, 2019). It is worth noting, however, that studies such as these often consider traditional encyclopedias (whether available electronically or not) and Wikipedia as analogous products. Yet as Morgan Currie argues, “research that assesses articles [in Wikipedia] for accuracy and comprehensiveness too often glosses over the fact that articles are constructed over time and on another medium entirely. Wikipedia is a unique reference source...” See Morgan Currie, “The Feminist Critique: Mapping Controversy in Wikipedia,” in *Understanding Digital Humanities*, ed. David Berry (Houndmills, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 227.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Barton, “Is There a Wiki in this Class?: Wikibooks and the Future of Higher Education,” in *Wiki Writing: Collaborative Learning in the College Classroom*, eds. Matthew Barton and Robert Cummings (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 184.

<sup>7</sup> For recent OA numbers, see <https://www.sspnet.org/community/news/delta-think-releases-2018-updated-open-access-market-sizing-analysis/>

<sup>8</sup> Willinsky, “What Open Access Research Can Do For Wikipedia.”

open access work over paywalled content. We are cognizant, for example, of the disciplinary differences in the way that research is published, disseminated, challenged, and refuted; publisher embargo policies correlate with disciplinary publishing practices, including peer-review and differing rates of publication. We are arguing that in a context where openly licensed versions of paywalled materials are increasingly available — in absolute terms never before has so much scholarship been openly available — every effort should be made to identify and link to those resources.

To this end, we begin our analysis by discussing information control and gatekeeping theories in the context of digital crowdsourced knowledge platforms. Drawing on Jan van Dijk's work on information control in digital environments and Karine Barzilai-Nahon's research on virtual gatekeeping, we show how gatekeeping mechanisms, including editorial, channeling, and regulatory actions manifest in Wikipedia's editorial communities. The direct impacts of these gatekeeping mechanisms are clearly seen when considering the apparent gender bias in Wikipedia content. Subsequently, we consider the impact of Wikipedia's core content creation policies on another aspect of knowledge production and control: content verifiability. Specifically, using the discussions surrounding "WikiGate" as a springboard, we consider Wikipedia's position on content verifiability and the technical and practical accessibility of linked references in Wikipedia. Ultimately, drawing from scholarship on information control in digital environments, this paper contends that a greater emphasis on including references to openly licensed scholarship within Wikipedia would work to mitigate information inequalities, and considers how new initiatives could be used to improve the quality and accessibility of Wikipedia more generally.<sup>9</sup>

## PRACTICES OF INFORMATION CONTROL IN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS AND WIKIPEDIA

The theoretical concept of the gatekeeper was introduced by the social psychologist Kurt Lewin in 1951. Gatekeeping refers to the practice of controlling goods, such as information, as they move from producers to users through an intermediary, and is considered by scholars of sociology, psychology, communications, and information

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<sup>9</sup> Fallis asks whether Wikipedia has a positive epistemic consequence on society. Put another way, he questions whether Wikipedia, as a knowledge resource, helps or hinders society from becoming more informed. He concludes that Wikipedia produces positive epistemic consequences, while at the same time stressing the importance of improving content and processes. See Don Fallis, "Toward an Epistemology of Wikipedia," *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 59 (2009), 1662–1674.

science as an exercise of power.<sup>10</sup> While the concept of gatekeeping has been fully embraced in the fields of communication and social psychology, more recently information science researchers have also adopted the gatekeeper theory in their analyses.<sup>11</sup>

Gatekeepers in virtual communities have several “gatekeeping mechanisms” at their disposal, including censorship, editorial, channeling, and regulation mechanisms.<sup>12</sup> Pertinent to our analysis of knowledge production within Wikipedia are editorial, channeling, and regulatory mechanisms. Editorial mechanisms refer to the ability to modify content, and decide, directly or indirectly, as to what constitutes appropriate content. Channeling mechanisms, on the other hand, refer to the process of directing users’ attention to particular pieces of information or resources. Examples of channeling mechanisms include making certain issues more easily accessible than others, either through hyperlinks or favorable ratings. The final mechanism, regulation, refers to explicit or implicit rules or social norms that give the community a sense of order.<sup>13</sup> In the context of Wikipedia, the “core content policies” serve as the main regulatory mechanism, in addition to other community-centered social norms. Approaching Wikipedia from a perspective informed by gatekeeping theory enables us to identify the often-subtle ways in which information is created, privileged, made available, or subverted.

Other information scholars have written about methods of information control in digital environments. For Jan van Dijk, “control is the enactment of... authority in several...categorical inequalities”; that is, control is possible when one user has increased access to digital technologies or content over another user.<sup>14</sup> For a power dynamic of control to exist, one individual must have both more information and a higher societal position than another.<sup>15</sup> Offline socio-economic relationships seem to have crept in the digital landscape as well, leading to major inequalities in terms of access. Extended far enough into the future, van Dijk’s conclusion suggests that far from being a socio-cultural equalizer, the Internet and its many offerings, including leisure, gaming, social interaction,

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<sup>10</sup> Karine Barzilai-Nahon, “Gatekeeping: A Critical Review,” *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* 43 (2009): 1; see also, Karine Nahon, “Toward a Theory of Network Gatekeeping: A Framework,” *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 59 (2008): 1493–1512, and Karine Nahon, “Gatekeepers, Virtual Communities and the Gated: Multidimensional Tensions in Cyberspace,” *International Journal of Communications, Law and Policy* 11 (2006): 1-28.

<sup>11</sup> Adetoun A. Oyelude and Alice A. Bamigbola, “Libraries As the Gate: ‘Ways’ and ‘Keepers’ in the Knowledge Environment,” *Library Hi Tech News* 29 (2012): 7-10.

<sup>12</sup> Karine Barzilai-Nahon, “Gatekeepers, Virtual Communities, and the Gated,” 4-5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Jan A.G.M. van Dijk, *The Deepening Divide: Inequality in the Information Society* (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), 19.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

commercialism, and information gathering, will reflect the socio-economic and cultural inequalities of the offline world.<sup>16</sup> Drawing on Weber's theory of stratification, Massimo Ragnedda complements van Dijk's work through his definition of digital stratification, in which he argues that rather than reducing inequalities, new information and communications technologies (ICTs) "add to those already existing, in a circular and cumulative process."<sup>17</sup> The inequalities produced by this digital stratification can affect a user's access to ICTs and their content, but can also affect their usage. In other words, even if users gain access, they may be dissuaded from using them, whether due to a lack of digital literacy skills or technology skills, or of not feeling a sense of belonging to the e-community.<sup>18</sup> These inequalities then produce and circularly reinforce a power dynamic that becomes embedded into the structure of ICTs and digital content.<sup>19</sup>

We argue below that Wikipedia editors participate in these forms of information control. Despite this, it is a measurably successful platform. Millions of users flock to Wikipedia for information on a daily basis, and thousands of editors are actively collaborating on what is the largest crowd-sourced project in existence. In a short period, communities that once considered it anathematic have embraced Wikipedia. It is not uncommon to see Wikipedia in university and college classrooms, for example, where it is used as a learning crutch by most or as an intricate and experiential pedagogical exercise by others.<sup>20</sup> The process by which Wikipedia content is created is also worthy of acclaim. As Helen Nissenbaum and Yochai Benkler suggest, Wikipedia has facilitated an environment where global communities of anonymous writers and editors connect and collaborate. To create content in this participatory environment, users engage in a "user-run quasi-formal mediation and arbitration, rather than on mechanical control of

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<sup>16</sup> Alexander van Deursen and Jan van Dijk, "The Digital Divide Shifts to Differences in Usage," *New Media & Society* 16 (2014): 507.

<sup>17</sup> Massimo Ragnedda, *The Third Digital Divide: A Weberian Approach to Digital Inequalities* (London, UK: Routledge, 2017), 21.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>20</sup> Alison Head and Michael Eisenberg, "How Today's College Students Use Wikipedia for Course-Related Eesearch," *First Monday* 15 (2010), <https://firstmonday.org/article/view/2830/2476>; Rob Nelson and Heidi L.M. Jacobs, "History, Play, and the Public: Wikipedia in the University Classroom" *History Teacher* 50 (2017): 483-500; Frances Di Lauro and Rebecca Johnke, "Employing Wikipedia for Good not Evil: Innovative Approaches to Collaborative Writing Assessment," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 42 (2017): 478-491; Samuel Kai Wah Chu, Yin Zhang, Katherine Chen, Chi Keung Chan, Celina Wing Yi Lee, Ellen Zou, and Wilfred Lau, "The Effectiveness of Wikis for Project-Based Learning in Different Disciplines in Higher Education," *The Internet and Higher Education* 33 (2017): 49-60.



behavior.”<sup>21</sup> In theory, content can only be developed if a level of consensus among editors is met, which has established a standard of quality that has contributed to Wikipedia’s popularity and success. Nevertheless, Wikipedia has been criticized by different camps for disadvantaging certain communities over others.

In recent years, Wikipedia has come under fire for its apparent gender bias. Despite the growing concerns over its existence and promises to address it, the bias persists.<sup>22</sup> Wikipedia’s articles about women are fewer, less extensive, and more focused on family and relationships than those about men, and women must therefore be more “notable” than men in order to be assigned their own page on Wikipedia.<sup>23</sup> Gender bias also appears behind the scenes, with the overwhelming majority of Wikipedia editors being male, and with edits made by women editors being fewer, smaller, and more likely to be contested or reverted.<sup>24</sup> The same inequities exist for content concerning other groups in the “epistemic minority,” such as indigenous communities.<sup>25</sup>

In these ways, Wikipedia’s gender bias is measurable and concrete, but the exclusion of female perspectives in Wikipedia can also be attributed to the platform’s infrastructure. Ford and Wajcman argue that Wikipedia’s infrastructure — composed of the determination of “acceptable” knowledge, of software and coding knowledge requirements, and of the technical and legalistic policy framework of Wikipedia — produces power relations that disempower women in particular.<sup>26</sup> Wikipedia prides itself on its amateurism, openness, and the freedom for all to edit its content, which leads readers to see its content as “natural and obvious,”<sup>27</sup> but this rhetoric hides a power

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<sup>21</sup> Hellen Nissenbaum and Yochai Benkler, “Commons-Based Peer Production and Virtue,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 14 (2006): 397.

<sup>22</sup> “Gender Bias on Wikipedia,” Wikipedia, accessed November 3, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender\\_bias\\_on\\_Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_bias_on_Wikipedia).

<sup>23</sup> Wikipedia, “Gender bias”; Heather Ford and Jody Wajcman, “‘Anyone Can Edit’, Not Everyone Does: Wikipedia’s Infrastructure and the Gender Gap,” *Social Studies of Science* 47 (2017); Claudia Wagner, David Garcia, Mohsen Jadidi, Markus Strohmaier, “It’s a Man’s Wikipedia? Assessing Gender Inequality in an Online Encyclopedia,” *Proceedings of the Ninth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* (2015); Wager et al., “It’s a Man’s Wikipedia?”; Wikipedia, “Gender Bias.”

<sup>24</sup> Ford and Wajcman, “Anyone Can Edit,” 512; Alana Cattapan, “(Re)Writing ‘Feminism in Canada’: Wikipedia in the Feminist Classroom,” *Feminist Teacher* 22, no. 2 (2012): 128-129; Wikipedia, “Gender Bias”; Wagner et al., “It’s a Man’s Wikipedia?”; Shyong (Tony) K. Lam et al., “WP:Clubhouse? An Exploration of Wikipedia’s Gender Imbalance,” in *Proceedings of the 7th International Symposium on Wikis and Open Collaboration*, Mountain View, CA, October 3-5, 2011, 2-3.

<sup>25</sup> For an excellent discussion see Henry Farrell and Melissa Schwartzberg, “Norms, Minorities, and Collective Choice Online,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 22 (2008): 359.

<sup>26</sup> Ford and Wajcman, “Anyone Can Edit,” 522.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 512.

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# ‘Innocence is as Innocence Does’: Anglo-Irish Politics, Masculinity and the De Cobain Gross Indecency Scandal of 1891–3

*Cal Murgu*

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## Introduction

He brought me round to the back of the house and into the conservatory. He loosed the buttons of my gallows [on the] behind. I did not pull my trousers down he pulled them down. He pulled my shirt up. It was in the dark and I felt something between my legs. At that time I saw him with his person in his hand. When I pulled up my trousers I told him I was not a boy of that sort . . . I wanted away. I then came round to the front of the house to leave. He told me not to mention it for the peril of my life, and that he would nominate me there and then.<sup>1</sup>

These were the words of Benjamin Rosemond, a Queen’s Island labourer in his early twenties at the Antrim Assizes in Belfast on 23 February 1893, as he described a sexual encounter with a former Member of Parliament. Seven other young men, ranging in age from 18 to 26, provided comparably vivid recollections of sexual contact with the same ‘public man’, Edward Samuel Wesley De Cobain. These testimonies, rich with detail – apparently so garish that the press could not reprint them – branded the former MP a sexual deviant. In all, De Cobain was charged on ten counts of gross indecency with eight young men in Belfast over a period of three years (1887–90).

In court De Cobain struggled to parry the buggery charge. He answered the accusation with a ‘not guilty’ plea, as he had done time and time again during the prolonged period of scandal that preceded his trial. His attorney presented a remarkable, if somewhat outlandish, defence. According to the defence attorney, the ‘abominable charge’ made against the defendant was the outcome of ‘a conspiracy initiated by a man named Heggie’, who had previously failed to blackmail De Cobain. He continued to explain that De Cobain had made himself objectionable to the Ulster Tory caucus when he defeated the Conservative nominee for the parliamentary elections of 1885 and 1886, and that he ‘incurred the enmity’ of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) during the Belfast riots of 1886. The argument was simple: the ‘high Tory clique’ and the largely Catholic RIC trumped up charges and paid poor young men for their testimonies to debase De Cobain for his political transgressions. Following De Cobain’s testimony and character evidence provided by Sir James H. Haslett, a former MP of

West Belfast, and Reverend W. G. Wesley, a Methodist minister, the Justice stressed the exceptional nature of the case and asked the jury to carefully weigh the evidence. After a forty-minute deliberation, the jury found De Cobain guilty on five counts of gross indecency. He was sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment with hard labour.<sup>2</sup>

The proceedings of this little-known trial only exist in a few newspaper reports, which fail to provide a comprehensive understanding. Trial reports were often condensed for pragmatic reasons, and their prose, saddled by judicial jargon and editorial restraint, rarely captured the true essence of the courtroom. National publications were careful to employ anodyne language in describing the trial and preceding scandal, although regional publications were more liberal with their reporting. While marginal, these alterations suggest that editors cared very much about the specific language used to describe alleged acts of sodomy. Indeed, in a climate where novel ideas about sexuality and gender identity permeated every corner of society, individuals became sensitive about potential contact with obscene publications, especially reports that detailed same-sex eroticism. The Obscene Publications Act of 1857, Parliament's attempt at discouraging the dissemination of obscene pornographic books and periodicals, did much to dissuade publishers from printing graphic reports. But as David Saunders suggests, we should understand these instruments not as 'negative and censorial' but as direct evidence of an 'explosion of discourse' about sex.<sup>3</sup> In this context, individual editors seem to have expressed genuine reluctance in publishing reports on gross indecency trials, but the concern for commerciality and transparency in the face of public interest often overcame any apprehension. To avoid being labelled as licentious, the press employed an intricate descriptive lexicon in its practice of reporting on trials of gross indecency. Thus, the press reported trials in muted ways, often practicing varying degrees of self-censorship.<sup>4</sup> 'Immoral and abominable acts' and 'unmentionable vices' were terms often used as stand-ins for sexual acts, but a tacit understanding among Victorians as to what those terms meant nevertheless existed. In this way, publicised scandals provided opportunities for readers to formulate questions, discuss unimagined possibilities, and empower or disempower others all within the innocuous margins of the broadsheet.<sup>5</sup>

Inconsistent trial reports and Crown depositions are all that remain of the De Cobain trial. Despite these gaps, the few scholars who have spilled ink on the De Cobain trial have fastened their arguments in the reports published solely by national papers. They appear convinced that De Cobain was most likely a homosexual – Montgomery Hyde, for example, refers to De Cobain's incarceration as the 'first monstrous martyrdom' – and a clear victim of a trumped up charge.<sup>6</sup> This conclusion lends itself nicely to a narrative of Anglo-Protestant bigotry against Irish sexual and political deviants (Oscar Wilde and Roger Casement serve as examples).<sup>7</sup> It seems that for contemporary historians, the De Cobain trial was too ambiguous to warrant a second look. Case closed?

The cultural significance of the De Cobain trial lies not in the nature of the accusation – scholars have shown that dozens of sodomy and gross indecency trials were put before the courts during this period – but in the fact that it was reported on in the first place.<sup>8</sup> The question is, why? In this article, I revisit this sexual scandal involving a parliamentarian and disadvantaged young men but I aim to focus our attention away from the trial and toward the period of intense scandal that preceded it. My objective with this approach is twofold. I want to resituate the scandal in the context of

late-nineteenth-century Britain and Ireland in order to explain the political and cultural significance of the scandal, and in the process challenge the dominant approach that privileges courtroom proceedings over sustained public discourse. The conclusions purported by Montgomery Hyde and Brian Lacey, among others, have been reached by uprooting the trial from the specific milieu in which it unfolded; in so doing, they have failed to heed H. G. Cocks's caution, that concentrating on exceptional sodomy trials in the late nineteenth century produces a 'relatively decontextualised picture' that tends to present a 'legal process that is episodic, spectacular and sensational'.<sup>9</sup> Contemporary interpretations of the De Cobain trial suggest that jury members could clearly identify De Cobain as a sexual deviant. Yet Cocks's work on Victorian sodomy trials provides us with a crucial framework with which to begin revising this conclusion. Cocks argues that the character of the 'defendant, prosecutor, and witnesses were central', for the private nature of these offences 'meant that the facts were often in dispute and not subject to verification', and that courts often 'stressed the significance of the respective characters of the persons involved'. Consequently, a defendant charged with homosexual offences aimed 'to demonstrate that he was not the sort of man capable of committing this sort of offence, and to demonstrate that his accusers were the sorts of persons whose accusations could not be trusted'.<sup>10</sup> A fundamental element of this type of defence is a look to the immediate past – to recent actions and comportment – to dispel culpability. Coupled with Cocks's framework, what we know of the De Cobain scandal prior to the trial allows us to reconsider its cultural significance.

In keeping with the 'new British queer history', this article does not attempt to posthumously exonerate De Cobain, or to reveal his sexual preferences.<sup>11</sup> Instead, it argues that during this period of prolonged scandal discourses concerning De Cobain's class, politics and gender performativity were presented and embraced, whilst explicit discussion of sexual deviancy was replaced with euphemism. As Cocks and Brady have demonstrated elsewhere, the British public, together with police officials and legislators could identify the markers that betrayed the men who regularly engaged in sex with other men. As homosexual desire became increasingly more publicised it prompted introspection for Victorians cognisant of the changing landscape of traditional masculinity. Yet the De Cobain scandal makes clear that at no point are scandals involving homosex solely *about* sex.<sup>12</sup> For instance, voices in the periodical press, in Ireland and in Britain, were involved in a very real struggle to make sense of – and at times leverage politically – De Cobain's contradictory behaviour. Further, those who contributed to debates over De Cobain's guilt engaged in a vigorous process of defining the 'appropriate masculine' reaction in response to accusations of this type. Although a jury of his peers found De Cobain guilty of gross indecency, the press found him guilty of effeminacy well before he entered the dock. In what follows I explore the multifaceted meanings of the scandal, first by sketching De Cobain's politics, then interpreting the varying cultural critiques lodged against his actions by moralists, journalists, and parliamentarians.

## Politics

Edward Wesley De Cobain, the oldest of four siblings, was born into a modest family in 1840 in County Monaghan, Ulster. His father, Reverend Edward De Cobain, was a Wesleyan minister – a vocation that his brother, Reverend Fletcher De Cobain, would

later pursue with varying zeal. Edward De Cobain was by no means a household name in British politics, but he did develop a reputation in Belfast political circles early on. He was educated at Bell's Academy, Belfast, before he manoeuvred his way into a position as Assistant Cashier for the borough of Belfast sometime in the 1860s. In 1864, he was promoted to Cashier of Belfast, and would subsequently become Grand Master of the Orange Lodge of Belfast, a post he held for five years, followed by an appointment as Deputy Grand Master for Ireland.<sup>13</sup> De Cobain's reputation enabled him to transition from municipal to parliamentary politics. In January 1885, with the support of the Orange Order, he was nominated as the Independent Conservative candidate for East Belfast. He was successful, winning by the slimmest of margins over the Tory candidate, Sir J. P. Corry.<sup>14</sup> De Cobain's constituents subsequently re-elected him in 1886; however, his humble background set him in stark contrast to the traditional characteristics of Irish Conservative MPs.<sup>15</sup>

De Cobain became an MP during a tumultuous period in nationalist politics. Lord Hartington and Joseph Chamberlain's Liberal Unionists together with Lord Salisbury's Tories maintained dominance over British politics, oscillating between coercive and conciliatory policies in dealing with the Irish question. The Third Reform Act rekindled traditional sectarian rivalries. By the third franchise extension Ulster Protestants held only a slight majority over Catholics but completely dominated economic life.<sup>16</sup> Catholics argued that they were an exploited minority in Ulster, whilst Protestants rebutted this by portraying themselves as a community under siege in the whole of Ireland. Prejudice and fear produced tensions in northern Ireland. Late-Victorian Belfast exemplified this political tautness, as sectarian tensions took centre stage in local politics and in daily life. In 1886 the imminent introduction of Gladstone's Home Rule Bill ignited a dry sectarian tinderbox. It was in the strained sociopolitical landscape engendered by the Irish question that De Cobain developed a reputation for being somewhat of an Orangist bulldog.

Perhaps most polarising was De Cobain's condemnation of the Royal Irish Constabulary following the June riots of 1886. In a particularly jabbing 'Letter to the Editor' in the *Evening Telegraph* on 6 August, De Cobain denounced the RIC and late Chief Secretary John Morley in the following manner:

The present reign of terror in Belfast is the outcome of 'Morleyism,' and the matter was deliberate, planned, and is with equal deliberation being executed. I have advised citizens to gather information and to bring home guilt to *the liveried assassins* . . . they undoubtedly belong to the same Invincible organization as that of which the assassins of the Phoenix Park belonged [*my italics*].<sup>17</sup>

The RIC swiftly challenged De Cobain's accusation, but by then the political climate was already too volatile. Sir Edward Harland, Mayor of Belfast at the time of the riots, noted in his testimony to the Belfast Riots Commission in October 1886 that the 'question of Morley and his assassins – liveried assassins, kept up ill feeling,' and that, 'newspapers are so easily obtained that our workmen can read them in the evenings and become thoroughly posted in these matters'.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, by associating the RIC's actions with the murders of Lord Frederick Cavendish and Thomas Henry Burke in 1882, De Cobain crafted a palatable narrative of nationalist violence and Protestant belittlement that circulated through the regional and periodical press with ease.

Irish nationalist MPs took aim at De Cobain's militancy in the House of Commons. Mr John Clancy, representative of North Dublin County, noted the total indifference

displayed by government towards the language employed by a ‘certain’ leading Orangeman in Ireland. Clancy was not the only one to draw attention to De Cobain’s brusque demeanour. Just months earlier the *Pall Mall Gazette* (PMG) had published an interview with De Cobain that characterised him as ‘representative of a type of militant Orangeism’. In an unvarying and abrasive style that could be described as bellicose, Cobain expressed the belief that ‘if an attempt is made to compel us to submit, [militant Orangemen’s] passive resistance will become active, and 120,000 will advance to guard and rally around the standard of empire’.<sup>19</sup> It is perhaps this unabashed defence of the status quo that made De Cobain tolerable to Conservative Unionists and so insufferable to proponents of Home Rule. For the rest of his tenure in Westminster De Cobain promoted organised labour and working-class interests with varying success. Primarily, he placed his full support behind Alexander Bowman’s Belfast United Trades’ Council. Although the numerous bills he sponsored rarely reached second reading in Parliament, his efforts nevertheless endeared him to his working-class constituents and fellow Conservative Unionists. De Cobain was somewhat of an oddity. He was a self-made Protestant evangelical supported by the working-classes of Belfast for his pro-labour stance in Parliament, and by Orangists for his brazen defence of Ulster Unionism. His brand of politics was as unique as his temperament, and in many eyes, he was a man worthy of emulation.

Yet in 1888, with his libel suit against Mr Dwyer Gray, proprietor of the *Belfast Morning News* (BMN) and MP, De Cobain’s contradictory nature began to surface. Gray had accused De Cobain of ‘not being a friend of the working man, Orangeman, or Islandman’, for he had reportedly expelled a tenant, whose wife had just died, for not being able to pay the rent.<sup>20</sup> Gray was a member of the Irish Parliamentary Party, and the BMN was an embodiment of that brand of nationalism. In a letter to his brother, De Cobain seems to have been aware of the potentially damaging effects of scandal: ‘I have myself a libel case at the “March Assizes” against Dwyer Gray, the proprietor of the *Morning News*, and I wish I were out of it [for] it is a scandalous case’.<sup>21</sup> These traces reveal that Edward De Cobain was well aware of the potentially hazardous situation he was entering. In a subsequent letter to his brother in April 1888, De Cobain revealed his frustrations: ‘I have grown sick of this thankless, and insignificant life’.<sup>22</sup>

Despite eventually winning the libel case against the BMN, De Cobain’s public struggles continued. In 1890 he introduced an anti-strike bill that ran counter to the platform on which he was elected. Bowman and the Belfast Trades’ Council swiftly undermined it, forcing De Cobain to reclaim the motion ‘in deference to the views expressed by the Trades’ Council’.<sup>23</sup> Few papers spared his embarrassment. The *Yorkshire Factory Herald* (YFH), a decidedly labour-leaning periodical, intimated that De Cobain had acquired signatures for a bill that had changed markedly after initial approval, and concluded that ‘under the present system serious injury to one’s reputation might be inflicted without redress’.<sup>24</sup> Other signees were quick to distance themselves from De Cobain, often expressing their antipathy in the press.<sup>25</sup> De Cobain’s legislative blunder generated a wave of unsolicited press coverage, and as a result, his personal character came under severe scrutiny. In 1890, an article in the *Freeman’s Journal* (FJ) – the Irish nationalist outlet – described an altercation between De Cobain and his tenants over the payment of property rates as ‘inconsistent with that of a gentleman, a large owner of property, and an MP’.<sup>26</sup> Contemporary reports argued that De Cobain had disenfranchised his tenants by having not paid the appropriate franchise rates